

ON THE PRESENTATIONAL CAPACITY OF THETIC-LIKE SENTENCES

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Abstract

Within the Firbasian framework of the theory of FSP, sentences are understood to implement either the Presentation Scale or the Quality Scale; the author's research into the area of FSP has recently dealt with the role of the English verb operating in Presentation Scale sentences (Pr-sentences) (Adam 2011, 2012; cf. 2009). In addition to the existential *there*-construction, it is the configuration of the rhematic subject in preverbal position that seems to convey existence/appearance on the scene most frequently in English (*A cruel smile hovered over her face*). The present corpus-based paper proposes to shed light on the structure and the function of a rather specific type of Pr-sentences patterning as relatively short structures with a tentatively context-independent subject (*The potatoes are boiling*). Such sentences functionally resemble statements that came to be labelled as "thetic" or sometimes "all-new sentences" (Mathesius 1975: 87, Firbas 1992: 86-87, cf. Kuroda 1972, Lewis 2001). The point is that even though from the static point of view (i.e. that of lexical semantics) such sentences do not suggest the characteristic of appearance/existence, they do not appear to be excluded from expressing presentation on the scene.

Key words

FSP, presentation, scale, thetic, sentences

1 Introduction

The present corpus-based paper proposes to throw light on the structure and the function of a rather specific type of Pr-sentences patterning as relatively short (minimal) structures with a tentatively context-independent subject which is formally marked with a zero or definite article (*The potatoes are boiling*, or *Gold flashed*). As a matter of fact, the principal research question is whether these sentences fall into the category of Presentation Scale (Pr-Scale) sentences at all, i.e. whether such constructions are capable of presenting a phenomenon on the scene, expressing appearance/existence with explicitness or with sufficient implicitness.

Methodologically deriving from the theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP) and drawing on several fundamental findings presented especially by Firbas (1992, 1995), Svoboda (2005, 2006), Dušková (1998, 1999, 2005) and Chamonikolasová (2005, 2010), the paper deals with the presentation sentences (Pr-sentences) operating within selected fiction narrative and New Testament narrative texts (Adam 2012). For the purpose of analysis two fiction texts

(novels) are used, viz. C. S. Lewis' (1950) *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (in the corpus abbreviated as N) and D. Lodge's (1979) *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses* (C). The biblical subcorpus contains the following New Testament books of primarily narrative character: *The Gospel of Luke* (L), *The Gospel of Matthew* (M), *The Book of Acts* (A), *The Book of Revelation* (R), and a part of *The Gospel of John* (J) (Kohlenberger 1997). The two types of narrative were selected to meet the needs of a large-scale comparative study based on the research into related yet stylistically differing sorts of discourse (Adam 2012). As to the statistical data, the whole corpus under examination consists of 207,366 words (i.e. 11,395 basic distributional fields); Pr-sentences make up for 8.8 per cent (for details, cf. Adam 2012).

2 FSP and the dynamic semantic scales

In a nutshell, in Firbas' view (for further information on FSP the reader is referred especially to Firbas 1992), sentences represent fields of semantic and syntactic relations that in their turn provide distributional fields of degrees of communicative dynamism (CD); Firbas defines a degree of CD as "the extent to which the element contributes towards the development of the communication" (Firbas 1964: 270). The most prominent part of the information is the high point of the message, i.e. the most dynamic element; other elements of the sentence are less dynamic (have a lower degree of CD). The degrees of CD are determined by the interplay of FSP factors involved in the distribution of degrees of CD: linear modification, context and semantic structure (Firbas 1992: 14-16). In spoken language, the interplay of these factors is joined by intonation, i.e. the prosodic factor. Through the interplay of FSP factors it is then possible to identify the degrees of CD carried by the communicative units, roughly following the pattern of theme – transition – rheme (Firbas 1992: 66ff). The distribution of degrees of CD within a sentence is not necessarily implemented linearly, and so it is inevitable to distinguish between the linear arrangement of sentence elements on the one hand, and their interpretative arrangement on the other (Firbas 1995: 63). The latter is defined as "the arrangement of the sentence elements according to the gradual rise in CD irrespective of the positions they occupy within the sentence" (Firbas 1986: 47). The two arrangements may either coincide, or there may be differences of various kinds.

In his summarizing monograph, Firbas (1992: 41ff) introduced the idea of the so-called dynamic semantic scales that are implemented in sentences; they functionally reflect the distribution of communicative dynamism (CD) and operate irrespective of word order. In principle, Firbas distinguishes two types of

dynamic-semantic scales: the Presentation Scale (Pr-Scale) and the Quality Scale (Q-Scale). In these scales, each element is ascribed one of the dynamic-semantic functions (DSFs), such as Phenomenon to be Presented (Ph), Specification (Sp), Bearer of Quality (B), Setting (Set), etc. (for further details as well as the complete list of DSFs cf. Firbas 1992). In contrast with a static approach towards semantic functions of sentence constituents (e.g. agent, instrument etc.), the dynamic semantic functions may change in the course of the act of communication; the same element may thus perform different functions in different contexts and under different conditions (cf. also Svoboda 2005: 221, Chamonikolasová & Adam 2005, Hurtová 2009, Chamonikolasová 2010). The items of both scales are arranged in accordance with a gradual rise in CD from the beginning to the end of the sentence reflecting the interpretative arrangement.

3 Presentation sentences

The Presentation Scale (Pr-Scale), i.e. the focus of the present paper, includes, as a rule, three basic dynamic semantic functions. Firstly, nearly every act of communication is set by the scene (Setting; abbreviated Set) of the action, i.e. typically temporal and spatial items of when and where the action takes place. Secondly, the existence or appearance on the scene is typically conveyed by a verb (Presentation; Pr) and, thirdly, the most dynamic, hence rhematic (and actually the only obligatory) element (Phenomenon; Ph) is literally ushered onto the scene.

In terms of the corpus data analysed, the second most recurring subtype of the Pr-Scale sentence pattern (after the predominant existential *there*-construction) may be described as that with a rhematic subject in the initial, i.e. preverbal position; such a configuration constitutes about 25 per cent of Pr-sentences and, owing to its syntactic features, is perceived as the prototypical, canonical type connected with the Pr-Scale (cf. Dušková 1988: 62, 531-532). In it, the initial sentence element is typically represented by a context-independent subject, which is only then followed (in concord with the requirements of the English word order principles) by the verb, which expresses existence/appearance on the scene (Dušková 1999: 248-250; Chamonikolasová 2010). The sentence may also be opened with a scene-setting temporal or spatial thematic adverbial. As for FSP articulation, the word order of such configurations actually violates the end-focus principle observed in English. Nevertheless, sentences with a rhematic subject in preverbal position are considered unmarked by native speakers of English (exceptions may be observed in connection to prosodic re-evaluating intensification; cf. Firbas 1992: 154-156).

It follows that the verb operating in Pr-Scale sentences (Presentation verb; Pr-verb) presents something new on the scene. In relation to its capacity to present a phenomenon on the scene, Firbas claims that it does so “if it expresses the existence or appearance on the scene with explicitness or sufficient implicitness” (Firbas 1995: 65, cf. Chamonikolasová & Adam 2005, Chamonikolasová 2005, 2010, Rohrauer & Dubec 2011, Adam 2011). In the current corpus (and also in other corpora under my investigation), two broad types of verbs classified in this respect have been detected. Most Pr-verbs clearly express the existence or appearance on the scene in an explicit way. Prototypically, these are verbs such as *come, arrive, step in, enter, appear, occur, turn up, rear up*, etc. (Adam 2010, 2011). The Pr-verbs falling into this category are, in their nature, dynamic, mostly intransitive, and carry the meaning of appearance, both as a result of a dynamic process or seen in the process of motion proper. Such verbs actually reflect precisely the definition of Firbasian appearance on the scene with explicitness.

However, research has convincingly shown (Adam 2009, 2010, 2011) that other types of verbs are also capable of expressing existence/appearance on the scene even though they do not convey the meaning of existence/appearance in a straightforward manner; in other words, they do so with sufficient implicitness. A relatively large group in the corpus is made up of Pr-verbs that express the existence/appearance in a rather implicit way; all different sorts of verbs, such as *overshadow, strike, buzz, wake, chirp, shine, seize, pour, feed, blow* or *preach* were identified in the research corpus (Adam 2010, 2012). At first sight, the verbs come from different semantic groups of verbs and do not have much in common.

4 S-V semantic affinity

During the course of investigation, it has become obvious that one of the most significant features of such Pr-verbs occurring in prototypical Pr-sentences may be described as a certain degree of semantic affinity between the Pr-verb itself and the clause subject (Adam 2011, 2012: 135ff, cf. Firbas 1992: 60). To be more specific, the corpus findings seem to reveal a significant semantic feature of what may be considered to express existence/appearance on the scene in an implicit way: the semantic affinity observed between the verb and the subject. In a number of previous papers (cf. esp. Adam 2010, 2011), various sentences with a certain sort of semantic affinity were detected. Cf.:

- (1) *A bee buzzed across their path.* (N120e)
- (2) *At that moment a strange noise woke the silence.* (N128)

In Examples (1) and (2), the action is so semantically inherent to the subjects that it is the subject that takes over the communicative prominence at the expense of power of the verbal content (cf. also Adam 2011). The static semantics of the verb then – even if expressing a specific type of action – is reduced to that of presentation. The semantic content of the verbal notional component is so natural for the agents employed that the full verb serves to denote a form of existence/appearance on the scene. In other words, the verb that operates in semantic affinity with its subject semantically supports the character of the subject. One may readily say that buzzing is an inbred activity for bees and thus in (1) the highest degree of CD is definitely carried by the subject. Similarly, it is most natural for a strange noise to wake silence (2).

5 Discussion and analysis

As has been mentioned above, within the framework of some large-scale corpus-based research into the area of Pr-sentences, a specific sentence pattern was detected, namely the minimal units featuring a subject and a predicate with no further modification – cf. Examples (3) and (4):

- (3) *The potatoes are boiling...* (N74c)
- (4) *...and the kettle is singing.* (N74d)

In these examples, the subject is clearly context-independent (it is lunch time and the narrator mentions the food for the first time, enumerating particular items). Yet the definite article is employed – apparently due to the obviousness of the phenomena in the context. This case can be seen as a result of both colloquial use of language in the particular dialogue and of the fact that potatoes (and tea talked about in the second part of the sentence) are to represent a commonplace snack. The question thus remains as to whether the verbs employed are capable of expressing existence/appearance of the subjects on the scene.

To my understanding, the core of this particular pattern appears to lie – apart from the aforementioned obvious semantic homogeneity between the verb and the subject – in a specific type of sentence, generally referred to as *thetic* or *all-new sentences*. Kuroda (1972: 154-156), drawing on the findings published by Brentano (1874), distinguishes between *categorical judgements*, in which reality is viewed as two separate acts and thus reflected as the subject – predicate paradigm), and so-called *thetic judgements*, in which reality is seen as one act only and simply the recognition of material of a judgement is conveyed. Analogously, Mathesius (1975: 81-83) speaks of *one-element sentences*, in which information

is seen as a complete, inseparable whole, typically to meet the needs of language economy or due to affective motivation. Since one deals with a statement of existence of a fact without the reality being split into two ‘traditional’ parts (which would lead to non-brevity), such statements are sometimes labelled as *all-new sentences* by Mathesius (1975: 81). Cf.:

- (5) *No smoking.*
- (6) *Teacher!*

To embark on my discussion on this peculiar sort of sentence (in bold below) and their somewhat problematic FSP makeup let me consider the following set of corpus examples in their verbal context:

- (7) [*“So you’ve come at last!” she said, holding out both her wrinkled old paws. “At last! To think that ever I should live to see this day!”* **The potatoes are boiling...** (N74c)]
- (8) *... and the kettle is singing [and I daresay, Mr Beaver, you’ll get us some fish.]* (N74d)
- (9) [*And that night there was a great feast in Cair Paravel, and revelry and dancing,*] and **gold flashed...** (N179c)
- (10) *... and wine flowed...* (N179d)

Sentences (7)–(10) express a predication that can be characterised by a single idea – it almost seems that the subject and the verb (or, functionally speaking, the basis and the nucleus) merge into one compound predication. As Mathesius puts it, “everything is new” (hence the term *all-new sentences*, cf. Mathesius 1975: 81–83, 87–88). It follows that they can hardly be split into the theme and the rheme. Accordingly, Mathesius (1975: 87) discusses such a sentence pattern under the heading of one-element *thetic sentences*, i.e. sentences in which one of the two basic elements is not present. Mathesius distinguishes between verbal and verbless one-element *thetic sentences*, the former existing e.g. in Czech (*Hřmí* [thunders]; *Prší* [rains]), but not in English (Mathesius 1975: 87). He argues that there are actually two subtypes of one-element sentences: the first one results from certain incompleteness, usually realised as “omission of one of the two basic elements, because its expression is either unnecessary or impossible” (ibid.: 82). Yet, such a sentence fully satisfies the definition of the sentence as the elided element is fully recoverable from the verbal context (the example is taken from Mathesius 1975: 82–83):

(11) *Nesmysl!* [nonsense]

Examples (12) and (13) are rather representatives of the second variant discussed by Mathesius, namely “one-element sentences whose substance consists in a communication that in itself is conceived as an indivisible content whole” (Mathesius 1975: 82):

(12) *Je teplo.* [is warm]

(13) *Svítá.* [dawns]

Such sentences, in which nothing lacks from the complete meaning, simply “state the existence of a fact and hence are called thetic” (ibid.: 83; on the notion of ‘thetical grammar’ cf also Kaltenböck, Heine & Kuteva 2011). In Czech, of course, such subjectless sentences occur without restrictions, while in English such one-element constructions are impossible.

This brings me to the idea that a similar structure, seen from the viewpoint of functional perspective, may actually be observed in English sentences such as *The potatoes are boiling.*, with the proviso that these are understood as sentences implementing the Presentation Scale (otherwise, they would ascribe the DSF of Quality to the subject). As Mathesius further comments, unlike Czech ones, the English thetic sentences express “nominally a subject that either affects us through our senses or is somehow connected with intention or behaviour of the speaker or hearer” (Mathesius 1975: 87). Related to the nominal tendency of modern English, thetic sentences (again unlike Czech) do not necessarily convey positive or negative excitement: cf. the Czech emotive exclamation *Tatínek!* [*Father*]; vs. English neutral *The bell.*, which would have to be translated into Czech as a two-element sentence *Někdo zvoní* [*Somebody is ringing*]; (for further details and examples cf. Mathesius 1975: 87-88).

Within information structure theories, the counterpart of *thetic* is usually *categorical*, the former being topicless and “all-new”, the latter containing a topic (Kuroda 1972: 154ff, Sasse 1987: 511ff, cf. Ladusaw 1994, Lewis 2001). To define this polar notion, Kuroda (1972: 154), admittedly deriving his conception from Brentano (1874), says that

this theory assumes, unlike either traditional or modern logic, that there are two different fundamental types of judgements, the categorical and the thetic. Of these, only the former conforms to the traditional paradigm of subject-predicate, while the latter represents simply the recognition or rejection of material of a judgement. Moreover, the categorical judgement

is assumed to consist of two separate acts, one the act of recognition of that which is to be made the subject, and the other, the act of affirming or denying what is expressed by the predicate about the subject.

As has been suggested above, the idea that all sentences are either categorical orthetic originated with the work of Franz Brentano (1874) and was elaborated by his pupil Anton Marty (1908). As Lewis claims, “the theory describes thetic judgements to be the simple recognition or rejection of some judgement material (i.e. proposition)” (Lewis 2001: 3). Similarly, Kuroda (in Lewis 2001: 3) observes in Japanese syntax two analogous types of statements: categorical judgements (sentences with logical subjects) and thetic judgements (sentences with no logical subjects):

Kuroda (...) uses this theory to explain a syntactic phenomenon in Japanese, at the same time applying restrictions to the constituents of the two judgments. The phenomenon in question is the selection of syntactic markers by the NP in subject position. The syntactic subject selects either *-ga* or *-wa* as a marker. Sentences that select *-ga* have the same translation as those that select *-wa*.

Within his comments on the dynamic and the static approach that can be adopted to analyse the functions of different sentence elements Firbas (1992: 86-87) also actually treats the question of thetic sentences, even though he does not use this label. In the relevant passage, he argues that verbs that – from the static point of view (i.e. lexical semantics) – “do not even suggest the characteristic of appearance/existence are not excluded from performing the dynamic Pr-function, although they are particularly suited to perform the dynamic Q-function” (Firbas 1992: 87). To illustrate this, he uses the following example, actually analogous to my sentence – cf. Examples (4) above:

(14) *The kettle boils.*

Firbas says that in this sentence (14) the subject *kettle* is clearly context-independent, and it certainly permits the Ph-perspective; the verb would then perform the Pr-function. He goes on to add that “if context-dependent, on the other hand, it prevents the Pr-perspective and permits only the Q-perspective, the verb performing the Q-function” (Firbas 1992: 87). Firbas concludes, at first sight paradoxically enough, “Statically speaking, the verb *boil* is not a verb of appearance/existence” (ibid.); yet, under favourable contextual and syntactic-

semantic conditions, it is capable of expressing existence/appearance on the scene.

At this point let me recall the crucial role of the semantic affinity between the (potentially) rhematic subject and its (potentially) presenting predicate, under the influence of which actions represent inherent qualities of the subjects. In other words, the presentation load of the subject prevails over the action itself. It is the existence of the entity (not the manner of the action) that is dominant and serves the purpose of the communication. In this sense, S-V semantic affinity is tightly related to the thetic, presenting idea; owing to the semantic affinity, the action is backgrounded, reduced to that of existence. The current corpus contains among others the following affinitive S-V pairs:

- (15) *potatoes – boil*
kettle – sing (i.e. “steam”), cf. Firbas’s (1992: 87) *kettle – boil*
the Sun – rise
birds – sing

It has become clear that when talking about one-element sentences (and about the FSP interpretation of such sentences) it is the immediately relevant context that plays a crucial role (Sæbø 2006: 31-33, cf. Mathesius 1975: 86-87). Going back to my introductory example, for instance, in *The potatoes are boiling*, the subject may theoretically be clearly context-dependent. Yet the situational linguistic context rather suggests that the subject is irretrievable from the immediately relevant context – cf. Example (7) above. Furthermore, there is virtually nothing else potatoes can do (this would point to semantic affinity, incidentally), which is also reflected in the use of the overtly transitive verb. In the deep-structure sense, nevertheless, one may speak of intransitive use. At the same time it seems that it is not entirely possible to interpret *The potatoes are boiling/ ...the kettle is singing* as classic representatives of the Presentation Scale; due to the dubious issue of their subjects’ context (in)dependence, they appear to be somewhere in the grey zone with potential interpretation, i.e. at the interface between clear-cut Presentation Scale and Quality Scale sentences. Thus, it is the context (in)dependence of the subject that plays a decisive role here (if it were not for the definite article, the interpretation would inline to Pr-Scale, of course, cf. *A bee buzzed across their path.*).

Tentatively speaking, there is one more difference between *The potatoes.../ The kettle...* on the one hand and *A bee...* on the other. Namely, it is their operation in the wider discourse: whereas the bee is definitely a part of the discourse, being an item of description in the narrative which consists of a number of similar

descriptors, it seems that the phrases *The potatoes are boiling* / *The kettle is singing* really represent the whole act that actually depicts the existence of the entities rather than their particular actions. On top of that, *buzzing*, unlike *boiling*, is rather dynamic and so is more disposed to express presentation on the scene; the boiling potatoes evoke a relatively static image. I believe that a very similar conclusion can be drawn concerning Examples (9) and (10) – *wine flowed* and *gold flashed*, which again express more a static description, an image, even if they lack the definite articles, probably due to the fact that they convey notions of uncountable substances.

I also find it remarkable that such sentences are found in the text in pairs or even clusters; they never occur independently – Examples (7) and (8) constitute one series, the other one is formed by Examples (9) and (10). The corpus contains yet one more set of similar sentences: within three New Testament verses there are six short descriptive structures that can be understood as thetic ones. Actually, these are two larger compound sentences, formed by Examples (16)-(18) and (19)-(21) respectively:

- (16) *The rain came down...* (M7:25a)
- (17) *...the streams rose...* (M7:25b)
- (18) *...and the winds blew ...* (M7:25c)
- (19) *The rain came down...* (M7:27a)
- (20) *...the streams rose...* (M7:27b)
- (21) *...and the winds blew ...* (M7:27c)

Analogously, it is somewhat difficult to identify the rheme and the theme in these sentences, including the degrees of communicative dynamism of individual units. The question remains again as to whether the subjects are context-dependent or context-independent, as they appear for the first time in the immediately relevant context, yet are determined with definite articles. Rather than interpretative potentiality though, the thetic character of the units seems to stand at the root of this dubious situation.

6 Conclusions

To sum up, I admit I am far from claiming that such sentences are genuine examples of what linguists label “thetic sentences”; the interpretative difficulties along with the special syntactic and semantic features of the sentences suggest that I deal with statements of thetic-like character. The FSP nature of these distributional fields is at least close to such an interpretation. Of course, a more

general conclusion could be drawn after better-evidenced and more in-depth research has been made. Summarising the discussion presented in the current paper, I am ready to claim that sentences functionally patterning as *The potatoes are boiling* – seen from the point of view of FSP – display the following set of features:

- manifest a statement-like, descriptive, thetic character;
- typically display a high degree of S-V semantic affinity;
- rather than a specific action, they express a single idea reducible to that of existence;
- under favourable conditions (above all the presence of context-independent subjects) are capable of presenting a new entity on the scene and so can serve in Presentation Scale sentences.

It should also be highlighted that semantic affinity of the English Pr-verb with the subject seems to stand at the root of the question concerning the (semantic and syntactic) criteria that make it possible for the verb to act as a Pr-verb in the sentence. Hence, such semantic affinity has proved to be a truly formative force operating in the constitution of the Presentation Scale sentences.

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